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Abstract

If the best criticism of art is another work of art, studying the act of translation (the movement of ideas from one area or method of expression to another, such as between languages, between ancient and modern, between literature and life) can be of value to the English teacher. Bad translations, as exemplified in the condensation and simplification of masterpieces to attract a wider audience, destroy the integrity of the work of art, but good translations, such as Shakespeare's translation of Plautus in "The Comedy of Errors," create an integrity of their own. Paraphrasing, reordering, and summarizing have some uses in classroom translation, but they are nonliterary methods of teaching literature and violate the integrity of the work. Juxtaposition--the placing of two works side by side with as few preconceptions as possible about what the results will be--frequently gives insight into both works. Comparing imitations and parodies with the works that inspired them can also be enlightening. Other proven translation methods are comparing different plays on the same subject, comparing plays to films based on them, and comparing poems and paintings. (LH)

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The Translatable Element in Literature: Critical Theory and Classroom Practice

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For an inspection of various translations frequently makes obscure passages clear.

Saint Augustine,
De Doctrina Christiana

Translation, as used here, means more than the mechanical process of making ideas in one language available in another. Computers already exist which, using recent linguistic developments, can do this for us. Here *translation* refers to the movement of ideas between languages and, by metaphorical extension, to other analogous movements, those between poetry and prose, between play and film, between comic and tragic, between ancient and modern, between literature and life. These are the familiar activities of the teacher of literature who spends much of his time helping the student who finds an English novel as incomprehensible as if it were written in Greek. But what precisely are we doing in our classroom translation? What is the nature of this act? Can we do it better?

Critics remind us that true translation is incompatible with accepted views of the work of art. They emphasize the integrity or wholeness of the work because this is an important source of its value as truth. The particular words, rhythms, or images of a literary work cannot be replaced or translated without damaging the work's uniqueness and thereby affecting its freedom to be universal. It is a paradox: "A good work of art is said to be universally

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1. "Manners, Morals, and the Novel," in The Liberal Imagination, Doubleday Anchor Books, New York, 1954, pp. 214-15.

significant, and yet is quite unique inasmuch as it seems to be the occasion for as many different appropriations of it as there are individuals. In short, though it does not address us in the language of generalization, yet what it means seems universally true."[1] To be universal, a work must be a unique whole independent of other works and of its creator, free of the limitations of the man who wrote it and the limitations of his time and locality. Clearly, a literary work cannot have value in other times and other places if it is not self-contained; it cannot speak to later ages if its voice is not distinctive enough to be heard above the noise of contemporary problems. Edgar Allan Poe's strange obsessions with plagiarism, the inferiority of long works, and the heresy of the didactic are not so strange when these are seen as violations of the principles of uniqueness, wholeness, and the freedom of the work from being translated into moral precept. Longfellow, who was often Poe's target, you remember, was a translator in every sense of the word.

For Archibald MacLeish, as for Poe, translation is a four-letter word. MacLeish's well-known poem, "Ars Poetica," proclaims the inadvisability of translation in saying that a poem should be palpable and mute as a globed fruit, dumb as old medallions to the thumb, and that a poem should not mean, but be. In other words, a poem "does not address us in the language of generalization." But this, like Poe's criticism, is chiefly negative, and furthermore, it states only half of the truth about a work of literary art. Instead of Poe's or MacLeish's words, I prefer to use the aphorism of William Carlos Williams, "No ideas but in things!"

Williams' esthetic battle-cry, in referring to a poem as a *thing*, reminds us that it is as concrete and as separate from its creator as a physical object and that the end of art is not the communication of ideas or the sending of messages. However, in Williams' view ideas are clearly not incompatible with things. Insofar as *idea* can mean essential truth rather than message, Williams is reëmphasizing the universality of the literary object. Art does not exist for the sake of truth, so Williams begins negatively; but he concludes positively by saying that truth will be embodied in the fully realized work of art. Although he suggests elsewhere that art should ideally be "thoughtless" for the artist in the midst of creation, he recognizes—like all serious artists—that thought as well as entertainment is part of the esthetic effect. Literature is centrifugal and centripetal, he says. Williams' "No ideas but in things!" thus expresses the paradox of art and sets forth the dilemma that faces the artist, the teacher, and anyone deeply committed to literature.

Artistic truth or universality, which is quite different from moral precept, exists only in specific, unique works. A writer primarily concerned with the audience of all the ages is in danger of creating a poem which lacks individuality of image or rhythm; a teacher primarily concerned with the meaning of a poem has precisely the same problem and is probably incapable of

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1. Virgil C. Aldrich. Philosophy of Art. Prentice-Hall, New York, 1963, p. 4.

appreciating imagery or rhythm. Yet to listen to a poem is not to understand fully, and to write sonorous lines is not to create good poetry, either. As teachers we must strive to make our students understand, and we must reserve a place for the universal in our concept of literature. To this extent we must be willing to consider what the humblest kinds of translation may have to offer. And at the same time, we must not violate the integrity of the work, must not assume that translation of a good work does not involve dangerous meddling.

A common kind of translation will serve as my case in point: a widely used version of Dickens' *Great Expectations* that is probably more common than the original in American high schools. Though it is still English, the language of Dickens has largely been eliminated: the syntax is greatly simplified and images have been freely discarded to produce a shorter work that is certainly much easier to read. This translation, much like a Classic Comics *Great Expectations,* seems to identify meaning with plot, to make truth reside in this one aspect of the work rather than in the whole thing. Assuming falsely the existence of separable parts within a work of art, translation may attempt to reproduce the original's images, plot, intellectual structure, or some other "essence." But nothing of the artistic meaning can be reproduced without reproducing the whole, duplicating a unique object.

In weighing the artistic merits of this translation of Dickens, intentions do not count. It doesn't matter whether the translator was a good writer casually experimenting or a bad writer trying his best: Milton, experimenting, did a very poor job for a major poet, while Cowley, his lesser contemporary, did much better (compare their translations of Horace's ode, "Ad Pyrrham"). It doesn't matter whether the translator was attempting a "close" or "free" translation, whether he called it an adaptation, translation, or imitation. Sometimes it doesn't even matter if his intentions were dishonest, that he began with something like deliberate plagiarism, if his own creative faculties eventually came into play and gave the finished work the integrity of art. (I assume that this is what happened when Shakespeare's poetic gifts were called upon to make an old plot seem new enough to fetch a few pounds.)

And the modernity of the translation does not matter either: Keats ignored the eighteenth-century Homer of Pope and admired the seventeenth-century Homer of George Chapman, not because Chapman was newer or older in language but because his Homer came closer to Keats' definition of art. It is true that the universals in great literature, such as the epics of Homer, have aroused the interest of generation after generation and have challenged each new generation to capture the same universals in contemporary language. Insofar as most writers consider themselves part of a tradition and wish to measure themselves and their times against the past—as a kind of standard, this is understandable and it constitutes a worthwhile artistic activity. But the classic work itself does not depend upon an up-to-date translation being produced every generation to give it meaning. When our greatest contemporary

translator, Ezra Pound, says "Make it new!" he does not suggest that the classic needs the translator in order to reach an audience in the present, but rather that artists and readers in the present need the classics in order to know what their art should be. Because we need art of high quality such as the classics, translations for a mass audience or popular versions in a modern idiom are good if they have the essential attributes of art.

What do these arguments suggest about the high school translation of *Great Expectations?* The editors, or, in my terms, translators, may have honestly wished to reach more students or they may have wished to make money; their intentions do not matter. The fact that this translation has reached a mass audience is indisputable, but the fact that the audience's need for art has *not* been met is equally indisputable. The work, to someone unacquainted with Dickens' original, has a certain meaning; but because this comes through a bare plot rather than through a whole made up of syntax, vocabulary, imagery and plot, the meaning which emerges is a moralistic message rather than artistic truth. Although it is a fairly detailed plot summary, it is probably less successful than a comic book, however crude, in translating some aspects of the original, such as the limited point of view. This translation, undoubtedly considered by many an "adequate substitute," is the ruins of a work of art, by which I mean not a romantically ivied tower but a tar-paper shack with the roof collapsed. And worst of all, its acceptance as a substitute is evidence of much confusion about the significance of artistic unity.

The high school translation strongly implies that content and form are separable and that the language in which a story is told does not give that story a considerable part of its value. It suggests to the student that literary truth is primarily looking for morals in the narrative and not a response to the whole work coming from close acquaintance with it. Meddling with one text also encourages meddling with others, and, although it does not inevitably lead to censorship or deliberate deception, it seems bound to breed disrespect for the integrity of the literary work. A translation which omitted Dickens' name and did not make any pretense to being a short-cut to *Great Expectations* might not have any more artistic unity, but it would be a good deal less dangerous, because it would be less confusing.

What does the same critical examination show us about *The Comedy of Errors,* Shakespeare's translation of Plautus' comedy, *The Menaechmi?*[2] First, it is clear that Shakespeare's motive was not the noble one of making the classics available to a larger audience: he wrote *The Comedy of Errors* to make money and, perhaps, for the fun of it, to see how well his skills compared to those of the ancient writer. Furthermore, it seems very doubtful that many in the Elizabethan audiences thought of the play as a translation of a

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2. An English translation of The Menaechmi, useful for comparison with Shakespeare's, is in Guinagh and Dorjahn, Latin Literature in Translation, Longmans, Green, New York, 1942, pp. 43-79.

Latin classic; they must have accepted or rejected it on quite different grounds. *The Comedy of Errors* stands alone, as all translations finally must, to be judged on its internal consistency, its unity as a work of art. Few serious readers, literarily trained, would fail to see how the verse form and the puns which make up so much of the *Comedy's* comedy are related to the doubling of the main characters and to the doubling of the plot. And because it is not a great or a complex work, few high school students would be unable to see these unifying elements when they were pointed out in class. Unlike the textbook translation of *Great Expectations, The Comedy of Errors* is well worth the teacher's time; it will repay both teacher and student with greater insight into the nature of artistic truth, and because its frivolity cannot be easily perverted into any serious moral, it has advantages which are not found in some of the great Shakespearean tragedies.

So much for good and bad translation. The focus now changes to classroom forms of translation and to some suggestions for using them which may, I hope, be useful. We have seen that the least dangerous and the most satisfactory translations are those which come closest to being fully independent works, stories or poems in their own right. A corollary to this doctrine, to be developed in the following examples, is that the teacher who wishes to make the best use of translations in his classroom will employ translations that show more differences from the original than they show similarities.

First, consider paraphrase and summary, two ancient classroom forms of translation. Paraphrase at first appears to be a valid approach to literature as truth. But most paraphrases, as we all know, tend to be messages and morals rather than truth. This can be explained, too, as a confusion between absolute, dogmatic law and universal meaning, which implies that truth is—at least in art—infinitely variable. A paraphrase written on the blackboard or, worse, printed at the head of the selection in a textbook, will tend to become a law and will twist the students' concepts of art. However, paraphrase is not at all dangerous in a class discussion. In the rapidly changing debate made up of many conflicting voices, each suggestion of what a poem seems to mean serves to question the others and implies that none is absolute, eternal truth. Certainly teachers like Morse Peckham and Seymour Chatman would not make the mistake in class which they make in their very interesting text, *Word, Meaning, Poem* (Thomas Y. Crowell, 1961). There a prose paraphrase is called an "interpretational hypothesis" but it remains a paraphrase and a violation of the poem's integrity that is inconsistent with the care displayed in the rest of the book.

Although Peckham and Chatman failed to banish the written paraphrase, they introduced an important new kind of translation into the teaching of poetry. Directing their attention to the differences between the syntax of prose and the artificial syntax of much English verse and even some modern poets, they show the student how to make the syntactical translations which are often necessary for unskilled readers. This kind of translation, which I per-

sonally recommend, appeared later in a second text, *Poetry: from Statement to Meaning* (Oxford University Press, 1965), by Jerome Beaty and William Matchett. In it syntactical translation is called "reordering" and is carefully distinguished from paraphrase: " 'Reordering' differs from 'paraphrase' in that it attempts to keep the structure and vocabulary of the original in so far as it is consistent with normal prose usage; 'paraphrase' is the rendering of the original into words and structures of the paraphraser." And they realize that if paraphrase is dangerous, reordering is only a little less so: its "function is to help the reader clarify the prose statement of a poem so that he may understand it first in prose terms and thus may eventually see how far the poem transcends that sense." "Used alone and erroneously," even reordering "could be quite destructive to the right reading of poetry."

Just as a poem's syntax, given careful study, yields a meaning that is not the universal meaning of the poem, so does the plot summary of a story or drama lead us astray while trying sincerely to lead us to the truth. Laura Bohannon tells of an anthropologist's attempt to summarize *Hamlet* for a group of West African tribesmen: "I began in the proper style, 'Not yesterday, not yesterday, but long ago, a thing occurred. One night three men were keeping watch outside the homestead of the great chief, when suddenly they saw the former chief approach them.' "

"Why was he no longer their chief?"

"He was dead," I explained. "That is why they were troubled and afraid when they saw him."

"Impossible," began one of the elders, handing his pipe on to his neighbor, who interrupted, "Of course it wasn't the dead chief. It was an omen sent by a witch. Go on."

Slightly shaken, I continued . . . "Then the man who knew things—his name was Horatio—said this event was the affair of the dead chief's son, Hamlet."

The old men muttered: such omens were matters for chiefs and elders, not for youngsters; no good could come of going behind a chief's back (and Hamlet's uncle was now chief). ["But," I said] "In our country the son is next to the father. The dead chief's younger brother had become the great chief. He had also married his elder brother's widow only about a month after the funeral." "He did well," the old man beamed and announced to the others, "I told you that if we knew more about Europeans, we would find they really were very like us."[3]

Even where cultural differences do not cause misinterpretations of the plot summarized, such summaries are inevitably a source of other confusions. Some may be avoided, however, by asking examination questions and assign-

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3. "Shakespeare in the Bush," Natural History, 75 (Aug.-Sept. 1966), pp. 28-33.

ing papers that do not encourage the plot summary. For example, an essay examination may be centered on a substantial quotation from the text, anything from 50 to 150 words or more, and the student may be asked to relate this passage to the whole work. The relationships may be specified, such as style, plot, themes, images; or they may be left to the student. But this type of question will in any case require the student to move back and forth between the part and the whole so that some grasp of the work's unity is asked of him and the principle of artistic unity is properly kept before him.

While paraphrase, reordering, and plot summary have their limited uses as forms of classroom translation and should be known to every teacher, because different methods are called for by different students and different situations, these are basically nonliterary methods of teaching literature. They all, in various ways, violate the integrity of the work; and being unimaginative, they do not make use of the sudden insight and joy of discovery which are an important part of our experience of literature. I believe that the concept of juxtaposition, a simple, though not widely-known poetic device, offers a new and useful approach to translation.

Juxtaposition is comparison of two unlike objects, like simile or metaphor. But unlike simile, juxtaposition does not specify what qualities or parts of the two are being compared; and unlike metaphor, it does not insist on an identity between the two. The two are placed side by side, available for both comparison and contrast, and the reader must do the imaginative work which is largely done for him in an ordinary simile or metaphor. Recall the famous *haiku* which is often considered a perfect sample of imagistic juxtaposition: "On a withered branch/ a crow has settled/ autumn nightfall." Because the crow's settling is not said specifically like the settling of the night, a wide range of likenesses is suggested; and because the elements of the unstated comparison remain independent, they also function as contrasts, involving ways in which the night and crow exist on different levels.

Juxtaposition in the teaching of literature is the placing of two works side by side with as few preconceptions as possible about what the results are going to be. In this method, the principle of inductive teaching works with the concept of learning as discovery, while both works being compared remain equal and independent wholes that have value as art. The integrity of both is so important that translations produced for a particular purpose, much like paraphrases, are seldom as useful as the more accidental or at least less purposeful juxtapositions. For example, exercises with minor revisions—changing a few words—of well-known originals are sometimes useful, but they seldom offer the insight of real juxtaposition. W. D. Snodgrass' decadent version of "She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways" and Thomas Parnell's eighteenth-century revision of a Donne satire,[4] like an author's revision of his own work,

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4. See Exercise Exchange: For Teachers of English in High Schools and Colleges, 11(November, 1963).

do provide the student with material for both comparison and contrast, but they also focus attention on details so successfully that the student cannot grasp the two as separate works of art.

Parody, too, is useful without being the same thing as juxtaposition. For example, note some of the parodies of the Victorian Charles Stuart Calverley. In "Morning" he produces a very funny parody of the eighteenth-century ode:

Tis the hour when white-horsed Day
Chases Night her mares away;
When the Gates of Dawn (they say)
Phoebus opes;
And I gather that the Queen
May be uniformly seen,
On the slopes.
When the plowman, as he goes
Leathern-gaitered o'er the snows,
From his hat and from his nose
Knocks the ice;
And the panes are frosted o'er
And the lawn is crisp and hoar,
As has been observed before
Once or twice...[5]

Like Calverley's parodies of the literary ballad, this parody is too close to its target and not capable of standing alone as a work of art. His contemporary, Lewis Carroll, offers more works for juxtaposition, as W. H. Auden suggests when he puts "The Hunting of the Snark" alongside *Moby Dick* in *The Enchafed Flood: Romantic Iconography of the Sea.* But I ought to mention that truly great parodies exist. Max Beerbohm's parody of Joseph Conrad's "The Lagoon" (in *A Christmas Garland*[6] under the title of "The Feast") sheds more light on the meaning of Conrad's story—and it is a complex work of art—than any criticism of it I have ever seen.

Juxtaposition, under the name of the ideogrammic method, is the basic subject of Ezra Pound's *ABC of Reading* (New Directions Paperbook 89) a book specifically addressed to teachers, though admittedly also designed to annoy them. Pound deliberately seeks out odd and little-known translations of the classics, such as a medieval Latin translation of the *Odyssey* and a Middle Scots translation of the *Aeneid,* not so much because these are superior to all other translations as because they do not resemble the originals in any superficial way and they require a good deal of effort on the reader's part to see what the relationship between the two actually is. An extreme example of the method is contained in Pound's assertion in the *ABC* that "the way to

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5. For the full poem see Poetry of the Victorian Period (Scott-Foresman, 1930) ed. by Woods.
6. Available in a Dutton paperback.

study Shakespeare's language is to study it side by side with something different and of equal extent. The proper antagonist is Dante, who is of equal size and DIFFERENT." The point, he says, is to give the mind leverage.

Pound's own work is often a kind of juxtaposition. His *Homage to Sextus Propertius,* which was inaccurately greeted as a bad translation of the mechanical kind, is properly seen as the type of translation which is called an *imitation* because it recreates the original rather than recopies it. The *Homage,* now considered as great an imitation as Samuel Johnson's "Vanity of Human Wishes" and FitzGerald's *Rubyiat,* contained a number of carefully deployed anachronisms that were intended to remind the reader of the distance between the imitation and the original. The existence of such distance is an important element in successful teaching by juxtaposition, so important that the name of the author matters a good deal less than the spirit of the work. For example, very few of the hundreds of English translations of Horace's "Ad Pyrrham" (Ode to Pyrrha) are usable because most translators, including Milton, stayed too close to the meter or imagery of the original Latin. Abraham Cowley, a much inferior contemporary of Milton, imitated rather than translated Horace, and therefore produced a better poem for our purposes.

Material for juxtaposition is especially abundant in drama, where concern for plagiarism has always been less acute than in other genres. Several collections of parallel plays are now available; Wilfred Jewkes' and Jerome B. Landfield's *Joan of Arc* (Harcourt, Brace, 1964), for example, contains dramas by Schiller, Shaw and Anouilh as well as documentary material and historical accounts. One problem with such collections is to avoid the historical source-hunting which they suggest by their very arrangement. Although the later plays may well be derived from the earlier or both from the same historical facts, it is their originality and uniqueness which has value for the teacher of literature. Strong cultural and stylistic differences provide the necessary distance between plays, so that the teacher should look for sharp contrasts and imaginative leaps that do not attempt to "classicize" and hide the passage of the centuries. Schiller's *Maid of Orleans* would function better beside Brecht's *St. Joan of the Stockyards* than beside Anouilh's *The Lark;* Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* would function better beside Sidney Kingsley's modern American version, *Detective Story,* than beside Cocteau's *Infernal Machine,* although Cocteau's is a much better play.[7]

Films based on literary texts are widely and frequently ridiculed on the principle that a film cannot possibly be a faithful translation of the original. In a fundamental sense, this is true; but it should not be taken to prove that "literary" films are bad. Because the film is a discrete and separate medium, it cannot translate literary works mechanically: to be itself and be good art, the film must not translate closely, but imitate and create some distance be-

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7. A good film version of Detective Story, directed by William Wyler, may be rented from Films, Inc., 4420 Oakton St., Skokie, Illinois 60076.

tween itself and the original. Accordingly, film/play juxtaposition can very often be valuable, as many teachers know. However, it may become an academic and unilluminating exercise if the importance of distance is overlooked. Those films which are culturally and linguistically the farthest from the original will be the most successful. For example, the German film *Der Rest ist Schweigen* (The Rest is Silence) serves the teacher of *Hamlet* well because it contains no trace in the subtitles of Shakespeare's language and at the same time offers the basic plot of Shakespeare's play in a quite different setting: Germany after World War II. The ghost of a German munitions king, supposedly killed in an air raid, communicates with his son, a student at Harvard, by telephone; Polonius is a psychiatrist quick to diagnose everyone around him; Ophelia spends much of her time in the greenhouse of her bombed-out home; Horatio is a British intelligence officer assigned to war-crimes investigations; and Hamlet is mysteriously intent on writing a ballet to be produced for his mother and his uncle.[8]

This German *Hamlet* stands out in contrast to Russian films based on Shakespeare, of which the most recent are Sergei Youkevitch's *Othello* (1955) and Grigori Kozintsev's *Hamlet* (1964). These Russian films are relatively useless to the teacher, except as mechanical translations of words into actions on the screen. Not only are they weighted down with Elizabethan costumes, but they are also heavily dependent on Shakespeare's words: the *Othello* does not have subtitles, but a dubbed soundtrack in English giving the Shakespearean lines; the *Hamlet,* although based on Pasternak's prose translation into Russian, has subtitles which follow Shakespeare rather than tell the audience what the actors are saying. Shakespeare's work as a whole is not illuminated by such films, though individual scenes may give real insight; the advantage of linguistic distance has been thrown away. Students will be stirred imaginatively and art will be served more properly by the avoidance of Elizabethan dress and Shakespearean verse which characterize a medieval Japanese *Macbeth* and a modern-dress German *Hamlet.*

If the film/play contrast is valuable for bringing different media into juxtaposition, then juxtapositions of literature with painting, sculpture, music, dance, or architecture are also valuable teaching methods. They do not lead us away from the text but lead us from the emphasis on parts rather than wholes which close textual reading may encourage. However, they are not a substitute for familiarity with the text and they may create some confusion if a student is carelessly led to assume that an image in a poem has a real rather than a metaphorical connection with an image in a painting. If the

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8. May be rented from Film Center, Inc., 20 E. Huron St., Chicago, Illinois 60611. Also recommended is Akira Kurosawa's Japanese imitation of Macbeth, released in this country as Throne of Blood.

medium actually is part of the work's meaning, as most critics agree today, differences in media cannot be ignored without distorting the meaning of the work.

When Wallace Stevens wrote the following lines in "Peter Quince at the Clavier," he was deliberately erasing the lines between media in order to abstract from all of them a single quality of art:

> (The first seven and one-half
> lines from "Peter Quince at the
> Clavier.")

Out of specific arts—music, painting, and poetry—Stevens abstracts a universal of art which he calls *feeling*. But physical sensation (feeling) is not separable from emotion (feeling), as art demonstrates again and again. All art, to give emotion, must be physically experienced. Thus the "confusion" of media with which Stevens started is ironically denied by the existence of their universality in specific physical sensations, where those of music cannot possibly be those of painting. Meanwhile, the universality of art has been made a little clearer.

This is the main purpose I see in the juxtaposition of paintings and poems that I often include in my own classes. Using reproductions or slides of some paintings by Pieter Breughel, I put the visual work next to the literary one, and I prefer William Carlos Williams' series, *Pictures from Breughel* (New Directions paperback) to most of the others available. The result is not confusion, except perhaps at first, but much greater appreciation of a kind of poetry which does not appear to allow for universality in its concentration on small details. Detail and pattern, part and whole, are similarly unified in Breughel and Williams, a fact which many students actually see for themselves.

Williams' poems gain in artistic value by standing in relation to quite different works of art. They do not suffer by being translations, yet they are, as whole works, easier to grasp when they are presented as free translations or imitations. The freedom of the translations made by major literary artists, such as Williams is, in fact, the key to how I believe the teacher of literature ought to approach his task: the teacher who wishes the poem or play to exist free of messages as an independent work of art will periodically free himself from mechanical translation and detailed analysis, and he will remember that the best criticism of a work of art is another work of art.